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## THE FAMILY IN BJØRNSON'S TALES

### I

#### INTRODUCTION

##### *Bjørnson's Early Attitude Toward Woman's Rights*

Among the great social problems which confronted the rising generation in Bjørnson's youth, the most important perhaps was the question of woman's rights. Social democracy, based upon the recognition of human rights, necessarily involves the moral and social equality of the sexes. It is not surprising, therefore, that during the 50's and 60's the question of woman's rights became one of the vital themes in Norwegian literature. The emancipation of woman was clearly recognized as a prime requisite for the regeneration of the whole social order, to which Wergeland, Ibsen and Bjørnson had devoted themselves. The social health of a nation is founded primarily upon the family and in the family it is woman who is the chief moral factor.

It seems, therefore, paradoxical that when Camilla Collett introduced this momentous problem into Norwegian literature by the publication of her epoch-making novel, *Amtmandens Døtre* (1855), Bjørnson's criticism<sup>1</sup> of her work seemed to be unduly severe. As a matter of fact, Bjørnson never opposed the cause which Fru Collett had espoused, altho at first he did assume an openly hostile attitude towards her lack of constructive propaganda<sup>2</sup> and the depressing atmosphere of her novels. Bjørnson's own definition<sup>3</sup> of the poet's mission in life, illustrated so beautifully in the parable "Æn om vi klædde

<sup>1</sup> According to Camilla Collett, Bjørnson referred to her novel as "an ugly book" (*en styg bog*). This statement, however, Bjørnson denied in his review of 1880 in *Morgenbladet* (cf. Footnote 10).

<sup>2</sup> Cf., for instance, his series of articles directed against Fru Collett under the title of *Kristiania og Studenterne* (1855); cf. Christen Collin, *Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson* II, 109 f.

<sup>3</sup> "Digteren kaster stråler med sin personlighed, giver solglade ord, hjælper til at lægge livet tilrette; at kunne sige ord til rette tid, som flammer;—det er at være digter."

fjællet?" (in the introduction to *Arne*), is sufficient to explain a seemingly incongruous attitude towards Fru Collett who was satisfied with a purely negative exposition of the truth. It was not in the slightest degree the *cause* which Fru Collett represented but solely the *manner* in which she represented it, and her lack of constructive propaganda to which Bjørnson was opposed.<sup>4</sup>

Even in 1854, before the appearance of *Amtmandens Døtre*, Bjørnson had expressed his dislike of the morbid and depressing atmosphere characteristic of Welhaven's school<sup>5</sup> and had openly allied himself with Wergeland<sup>6</sup> whose successor he felt himself to be; a more wholesome and natural poetry was necessary for a true interpretation of life. In tone and feeling Fru Collett's *Amtmandens Døtre* was, as it were, a sequel to Welhaven's *Norges Dæmring* and as such was in Bjørnson's eyes more or less a literary perversion. The injustice of this view, however, he later acknowledged<sup>7</sup> when maturity had restored the equipoise of his judgment.

In Bjørnson's earlier attitude towards Fru Collett we recognize, furthermore, the pedagog and moralist<sup>8</sup> as well as the poet. His educational and moral propaganda were as essential to his literary career as was the devotion to purely artistic ideals and went hand in hand with his efforts as politician and statesman to regenerate the social organization of the Norwegian nation.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lilly Heber, "Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson og Camilla Collett," *Bjørnsonstudier*, pp. 285-317, Kristiania, 1911.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Morgenbladet* (1854): "Welhavens evige Lamenteren over Verdens og Tidernes Pinagtighed," etc.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: "Det tusindstemmige, glade ja, som Wergelands bjergfriske, glade Sange modtog, maatte dog overbevise om, at sygelig Sentimentalitet ikke har hjemme her."

<sup>7</sup> Cf. his article, "Den moderne norske literatur," in *Kringsjaa* the year after Fru Collett's death (1895): "Hun har skrevet fortællinger, der hun med ildfuldt øie og veltalende appel, sætter fingeren paa et sygt punkt; virkningen har været velgjørende."

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: "Den norske literatur kjender i sine verker, at den vil tage sin del, den største del av det fælles ansvar, at en bog, der ikke rydder eller ligger saaledes, at den derved øger vor evne, gjør os modigere paa livsførelsens svære kunst, og derved letter livet for os, er en slet bog, hvor stor ogsaa dens tekniske kunst er."

By her attacks upon the inherited traditions with regard to woman's status in society Camilla Collett had paved the way for a revolution of ideas which Bjørnson naturally and readily followed. The deep impression which *Amtmandens Døtre* left upon Bjørnson's mind may be judged from the fact that only two years after the appearance of this work he himself took up the traditional theme of "the unhappily married woman" in *Mellem Slagene* (1857) and the next year in *Halte Hulda* (1858). In *Halte Hulda*, furthermore, the same suffering is analyzed in dramatic form as that which the unfortunate heroine in Fru Collett's novel endures; that depression, which in *Amtmandens Døtre* was chronic, in Bjørnson's *Halte Hulda* finds its solution in a violent tragic explosion, as it were. That he was perhaps conscious of a tone in *Halte Hulda* out of keeping with his literary ideals is evident from the fact that he made a studied effort to counteract the depressing influence of Hulda's tragic love by introducing the bright and happy relations of Thordis to Gunnar. Bjørnson was evidently struggling to free himself from the depressing atmosphere of the Old Norse sagas. His first great effort in this direction was the composition of *De Nygifte* (published in 1865), which he had already outlined as early as the year 1855 (cf. Christen Collin, II, 16).

Furthermore, much that Bjørnson expressed in his attacks upon woman's inherited status in society, both in his dramas (cf. *Leonarda* 1879, *En Hanske* 1883) and in his prose tales (cf. *Magnhild* 1877, *Støv* 1882), undoubtedly had its inspiration (in part at least) in Fru Collett's<sup>9</sup> courageous and indefatigable labor in behalf of her sex. Yet Bjørnson never openly acknowledged any personal indebtedness to Fru Collett, and when *Amtmandens Døtre* appeared he misunderstood, according to his own testimony,<sup>10</sup> the social importance of this epoch-making novel.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lilly Heber, "Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson og Camilla Collett," *Bjørnson-studier*, p. 316, Kra. 1911.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Morgenbladet*, 1880, in reply to Fru Collett's accusation that he had criticized her unfavorably out of a spirit of literary enmity: "Jeg skjønner rigtignok ikke nu, hvad jeg kan have fundet stygt i denne Bog for mer end tyve Aar siden; sandsynligvis har jeg sagt "uhyggelig"; men ogsaa dette Udtryk vilde jeg nu neppe have brugt. Sagen var, at dengang "Amtmandens Døtre" kom ud, skjønnede ikke jeg, hvad her begyndte eller dettes Ret."

## II

## FAMILY LIFE IN BJØRNSON'S TALES

The chief purpose of this article is to present a psychological analysis of Norwegian family life, as represented in Bjørnson's prose tales,<sup>11</sup> with especial reference to woman's social status.

Bjørnson based his whole system of ethics upon a spirit of love for humanity. This love for humanity, his naiveté of thought and simplicity of language made him the ideal exponent of popular ideals.

In his prose tales Bjørnson revealed the heart of the Norwegian nation. Even tho his Romantic ideals lent to the description of rural life and to the delineation of the peasant's character a decidedly idyllic tinge, nevertheless, the Norwegian people found therein the substance of its national life; the distinctively *national* was given an idealized form of expression. Bjørnson's idealization of the peasant's character (particularly that of the mother and the child<sup>12</sup>) was made all the more convincing by reason of the author's sensitive and sympathetic insight into human nature.

a) *The Social Problems Involved in Family Life*

The social problems involved in family life, as based upon Bjørnson's prose tales, may be briefly summarized as follows.

For the proper education of the child, an open and sympathetic relation between parent and child is absolutely imperative. Tomas Rendalen in *Det Flager i Byen og på Havnen* (1884), for instance, expressly states<sup>13</sup> that no educational theories can possibly prove successful, unless based upon this fundamental principle. This relation of love and confidence

<sup>11</sup> Bjørnson's dramas are likewise fundamentally psychological studies; cf. Chr. Collin, II, 18, who characterises, for instance, *Mellem Slagene* as "et lidet psykologisk mesterverk."

<sup>12</sup> Bjørnson idealized, for instance, the child in human nature in his poem *Barnet i Vor Sjæl*:

Den største mann på jorden  
må pleje barnet i sit bryst,  
og lytte, selv i torden,  
til hvad det hvisker tyst."

<sup>13</sup> "Al opdragelse som i dette æmne skal utrette noget, sætter som uomgængelig betingelse: *full fortrolighed mellem barn og forældre*. I alle fall mellem *barn og mor*."

should, above all, be preserved between *mother* and *child*, since the mother's moral influence is more vital for the child's welfare than is the father's.

But such an ideal relation between mother and child is often disturbed by conditions over which neither has control. The chief factor in this regard is perhaps the established tradition as to the father's supreme authority in the family. The mother is thus deprived of a controlling hand in the education and destiny of her child. "Are you his *mother?*," says Josephine in *På Guds Veje* (1889), when she attempts to assume the authority over her child. "I am his *father*. The *Bible* and the *law* make the father *the owner of the child*," answers her husband, who thus overrules all arguments, however reasonable or vital for the child's welfare, under the authority of religious and social convention.

Altho the mother constitutes the chief moral factor in the the child's life, she is, nevertheless, deprived of an equal responsibility over the child. "Do you believe that both parents should have an equal responsibility in the child's welfare," the mother in *Støv* (1882) is asked. "I most certainly do," she replies, "men have in this regard done exactly as they please, just as in everything else."

This injustice, which social and religious convention has inflicted upon the mother, undermines the moral health of the whole family and has a far reaching effect upon the future generation.

The most serious effect is perhaps noticeable in the character of the son. With the loss of the mother's moral authority the son is often prone to assume towards his mother the same presumptuous attitude as does his father (cf. e.g. Torbjørn in *Synnøve Solbakken*). At a very early age the boy learns that woman is to be treated as man's social inferior and those primitive ideals of physical superiority, as exemplified in the father and which naturally appeal to the boy's imagination, often serve to outweigh the higher moral influence and devotion of the mother (cf. e.g. Rafael, before his father's death, in *Absalon's Hår*). The boy's moral valuations are thus often perverted before he reaches an age of independent judgment. The mother's influence begins to prevail only after the boy's

chivalrous instincts are aroused, which lead him to take sides with his mother against an authority of brute force.

Somewhat different, however, is the effect of the father's presumptuous authority upon the daughter. If woman is regarded as the social inferior to man, the daughter's sense of individual independence is crushed from the outset, and even when the traditional view of woman's social inferiority is abandoned, the daughter inherits from woman's former state of moral slavery an attitude of suspicion towards the unselfish motives of the male sex in general. The effect of this attitude upon the daughter is not clearly traceable in Bjørnson's tales, but it plays a very important part in the psychology of Fru Collett's novels. This was, in fact, the immediate cause of the tragedy in *Amtmandens Døtre*, for Sophie's lack of faith in a noble character can be directly traced to her inborn suspicion that her lover's intentions were nothing more than masculine insolence founded upon the conventional right of man's supremacy over woman.

The remedy for such injustice in the home involves first of all an assumption of equal rights and a single standard of morals for both man and woman. The lamentable results of a double standard of morals and of the father's lack of moral responsibility for the child's welfare may be seen in the moral degeneration of the father's character. Hereditary disease of both body and soul can in all Bjørnson's tales be traced directly to the father's wayward life. The woman, therefore, has a new and most formidable foe to combat in the hereditary instincts of her child. In the great struggle against this social disease Bjørnson's main thesis consists of a new system of moral education (formulated in *Det Flager*), which consists in openly acquainting the youth with all the facts pertaining to sex and to hereditary disease.

#### b) Bjørnson's Family Types

The traditional and the 'modern' ideals as regards woman's social status are represented in Bjørnson's prose tales by two more or less sharply defined types of family. First, there is the peasant type (cf. *Synnøve Solbakken*, 1857, *Arne*, 1858, *En Glad Gut*, 1859-60) and secondly the more progressive and modern type of patrician character (cf. *Magnhild*, 1877, *Støv* 1882, *En*

*Dag*, 1893), such as Fru Collett usually depicted. This latter type often shares, as in Fru Collett's novels, the more enlightened ideals of the day and has come more or less into contact with the cultural elements of city life (*bymennesker*), as portrayed, for instance, in *Mors Hænder* (1892) or in *Absalon's Hår* (1894). In *Fiskerjænten* (1867-68) both types of family are represented (cf. Petra's family in the little fishing town with Signe's family or the more extreme case of Ødegård's family), and upon the social and cultural ideals of these two types the dramatic conflict is based.

The general attitude of the individual members of the family towards one another varies according to the traditional or to the more enlightened social ideals which the family holds. In the peasant family, for instance, the mother yields to traditional authority and is thus forced to find her way out of her difficulties by means of natural sagacity and common sense, while in the more progressive and cultural type of family she seeks to overrule her oppressor with those weapons with which the enlightened ideals of a new era have furnished her. But in either case<sup>14</sup> the fundamental principle involved is a sympathetic understanding and unselfish love between the individual members of the family, and especially between mother and child. Bjørnson's sympathy for the father under the unfortunate conditions of social tradition is very little in evidence.<sup>15</sup>

### c) *The Child and the Father*

Inherited tradition has made the father an administer of force and as such the child naturally fears him. By reason of the child's extremely sensitive nature a more or less artificial barrier is created between the two. The child cannot feel his father to be his true friend and the more delicate and sensitive the child is, the more does it seek the love and protection that the mother affords. Thus, for instance, Bjørnson says of little Trond (*Trond*, 1856): "With his father he didn't talk very much and was indeed somewhat afraid of him; for when his

<sup>14</sup> These two types of family, so plainly discerned in Bjørnson's tales, shall, however, in the following analysis not be sharply differentiated from each other since it is not desirable to force the psychological aspects of the individual characters into sharply defined categories of this nature.

<sup>15</sup> A notable exception to this, however, is the father in *Sigv*.

father was present, Trond had to keep quiet." Trond naturally feels his father's presence as an impersonation of authority and an intrusion upon the freedom of youth. Furthermore, this sort of 'truant officer' fear is aggravated by the consciousness that his father is not in sympathy with his interests. Under the existing conditions of family tradition Trond's instinct is perfectly correct. But far different is his feeling for his mother, who sees the child's heart, lives in the child's world and devotes her life to the child's happiness. When the boy gets his first treasure, a new violin, he imagines his mother as the *e*-string—"the tender sweet chord"—, but his father as the *d*-string—"the low, deep sounding chord"—, "which he never played on very much either."

This fine, sensitive chord vibrating in harmony with the child's soul, is beautifully illustrated, for instance, in *En Glad Gut*. When Marit's grandfather brings to Øyvind's family his message of ill-will, whereby the boy's whole future happiness hangs, as it were, by a thread, Bjørnson says: "His mother, who from the kitchen-door had heard everything, gazed with grief upon Øyvind and almost burst into tears; but she didn't want to make it harder for him by saying even a single word." This delicacy of feeling in the simple peasant woman is exactly the quality of little Trond's *e*-string.

The child's naturally wilful disposition Bjørnson depicts most skilfully in *En Livsgåde* (1869). When little Agnes, for instance, tries to teach her baby brother the Lord's Prayer, the little fellow repeats each verse very dutifully until he reaches the command: "Thy kingdom come, *Thy will be done*," whereupon he suddenly turns against his perceptress with a determined "No, no, I won't."

This naturally wilful and stubborn nature in the child the father seeks to overrule by force, while the mother tries to bend the child's will by moral suasion and a sympathetic understanding of the child's nature. The mother, therefore, meets the difficulty with far greater intelligence than does the father, and with far less disastrous effects upon the child's character.

The disastrous effects of this attitude upon the part of the father (altho the mother is also partly to blame) Bjørnson well illustrates in his tragic story *Støv*. The father has been reading Spencer's "Essays on Education" and seeks to apply Spencer's

ethical principles mechanically and without an understanding of the child's nature. In spite of the father's scientific theories his severity results only in inspiring his children with a morbid and unhappy fear of him. He threatens them with corporal punishment for an offense which was necessarily a result of ignorance. Knowing full well what their father's threat means, the children run away from home and are lost in a snow storm which overtakes them. The children are happily found again unharmed, but the mother dies of a broken heart and the father's happiness is forever destroyed.

Whatever mistakes the mother may have made regarding the education of her children, she understood at least that undue severity was a fatal course to pursue. That she did not, however, consider her husband *personally* to blame for his undue severity towards the children is evident from her statement: "O, he is just like most men in this regard, they amuse themselves with the children at times, and at times *strike* them too, when anything happens to displease them."

Bjørnson's social propaganda is here clearly in evidence; this tragedy was due primarily not to the individual character of the father but to the inherited traditions as to the father's ownership of the children and his consequent lack of intelligent attitude towards the child's moral perception and sensitive temperament.

So too in *Synnøve Solbakken*, on account of the father's severity and application of physical force, the relations between Torbjørn and his father are severely strained. Torbjørn's nature, however, is far different from that of Trond or of the children in *Støv*. Torbjørn represents the rugged, self-reliant peasant lad, whose will is bound to clash with his father's. His father's methods are, to be sure, unduly severe and even brutal, but this physical brutality was characteristic of the Norwegian peasant, and, furthermore, not at all alien to Torbjørn's own nature (cf. e.g. his unpardonable brutality towards his faithful horse). In order to tame his son's refractory spirit the father naturally employs the traditional method of enforcing authority. But this traditional ideal Bjørnson seeks to bring into direct conflict with the spirit of enlightenment and with the Christian ideals of a new social era. This spirit is shared by Torbjørn's mother who clearly understands

that a policy of brutal force leads to estrangement; but her protests are overruled by the father's high-handed authority. Even Synnøve's mother, who is anything but well disposed towards Torbjørn and his suit (she regards him as a sort of young ruffian), does not approve of his father's harsh methods. "He's too severe with the boy," she says. But it is also to be remembered that she shares the ideals of the pietistic sect of the *Haugianere*. It is above all in Ingrid, Torbjørn's sister, that we find the typically feminine attitude towards parental authority. Like her mother she sympathizes with Torbjørn but at the same time she understands clearly that it is Torbjørn's natural stubbornness and sense of independence which is the chief cause of the alienation between him and his father. Since she is not educated beyond the ideal that her father can be wrong, she yields to established authority and therefore tries to remedy the situation by correcting Torbjørn's faults. In other words, she seeks her way out of the difficulty by the common sense method characteristic of Bjørnson's feminine ideal in the peasant family, viz., by making the best out of a bad situation.

The following conversation between Ingrid and Torbjørn well illustrates the essential difference between the feminine and masculine attitude of the child towards parental authority.

"You are too independent; you know father doesn't like that."

"No, I am not too independent; father tried to hold back my arms."

"Yes, especially whenever you tried to strike somebody."

"Well, have people a right to say and do things to you, just as they please?"

"No, but you might put yourself out a little; father did that himself and nevertheless he has always been a respected man."

To recognize parental authority is not equivalent to forfeiting one's self-respect, but this typically *feminine* view of the remedy is, however, not to Torbjørn's liking and it is not until the boy's will has been broken by the catastrophe which befell him at the hands of the treacherous Knut Nordhaug that he accepts her solution.

d) *The Son and the Mother*

Such innate stubbornness and self-reliant individualism is perhaps the most difficult trait in the boy's character with which the parents have to contend. Even the mother sometimes fails to understand this, and consequently a catastrophe cannot be avoided, however sound or progressive her theories as to moral education may otherwise be, or however unselfish the love which she may bestow upon her son.

Such is the tragedy most skilfully portrayed in *Absalon's Hår*. The boy Rafael has inherited the sensual and rebellious nature of the Kurt family; "han var oprørets søn." At first he rebels against his father because of the latter's brutality towards his mother. "It became the boy's secret religion," says Bjørnson, "to oppose him (his father) and to help his mother, for she was the one who suffered." After his father's death he rebels in turn against his mother (Kirsten Ravn), who endeavors to realize her ideal in the boy by giving him all the advantages of an education and culture which his father had denied him. But by putting her son into a social and pedagogical straitjacket she arouses in him that slumbering spirit of rebellion which had previously asserted itself against his father; her methods thus result in just the opposite of that which she desires. She quite correctly attributes his sensual and rebellious nature to his inheritance from his father (the degenerate Kurt blood), but she never for a moment suspects that by her arbitrary methods she herself is to blame for the manifestation of the Kurt character in her son.

In *Absalon's Hår* the 'modern' mother appears in a most unfavorable light, because she has failed to recognize the fundamental instincts of human nature in her son and has consequently allowed her modern theories of culture to overshadow the necessary principle of intelligent co-operation. Both Ingrid and Arne's mother, altho limited by the peasant ideals of family life, take due cognizance of these fundamental principles and, therefore, even tho intellectually inferior, these women are in this regard far more intelligent than Kirsten Ravn. The latter has unwittingly fallen into the same error as that upon which the inherited traditions of parental authority were founded and to which she herself is violently opposed,

viz., the principle of *enforced* authority. Naturally she suffers a reaction from the bondage under which she was held by her arrogant husband and, therefore, after his death she in turn seeks to exert full authority over her son. But in her arbitrary and dictatorial methods she adopts the same weapons as did her husband, except that instead of applying physical force she makes her son's happiness contingent upon her own will. Her modern theories of education are thus applied in exactly the same way as the traditional parental authority, and she thereby prevents Rafael from understanding the purpose of her actions and the inspiring force of a mother's love which animates her; exactly as was the case, for instance, between Torbjørn and his father.

So too Arne is, like Rafael, "oprørets søn." His whole life is centered upon the desire to escape from the narrow hum-drum life of a Norwegian village and he too has inherited certain weaknesses of character from his father. But his mother, simple peasant woman that she is with no 'modern' ideals of moral or cultural education, is far more successful than Kirsten Ravn in reforming her son. Her tact and fine sympathy for Arne's failings break the boy's spirit of rebellion and keep alive in the boy's heart the fundamental instinct of love which in Rafael's case is marred by a misunderstanding of his mother's attitude of authority.

Yet we see in Arne's mother a peasant provincialism directing the course of mother-love. She takes advantage of her boy's secret love affairs in order to make his escape from her impossible. Kirsten Ravn, on the other hand, magnanimously renounces her son's love when he severs his connections with her. Her mistakes are due to an artificial standard of life and not, as in the case of Arne's mother, to a desire to further her own happiness. Her methods fail, but not on that account does she, like the self-centered peasant woman, have recourse to deceit or subterfuge. In spite of her false code of moral education, Kirsten Ravn's steadfast devotion to the higher ideal of renunciation finally results in Rafael's redemption, while Arne's soul never realizes its intense longing to expand and grow, but is forced back again into those narrow limitations which his mother's self-centered love had set for him, howbeit not without a certain degree of spiritual recompense.

The first essential to the child's moral training is, as Bjørnson said in *Det Flager* (cf. above p. 610), a relation of absolute confidence between mother and child. Here again Kirsten Ravn makes a fatal mistake in not telling her son the whole story of his father's life. The boy, therefore, is ignorant of the fact that his father's financial downfall was due primarily to the inherited trait of stubbornness and insolence in the Kurt family; his father would not tolerate his wife as an equal or accept her as a partner in his enterprises.

His father had discovered traces of cement deposit on their estate and upon the basis of his discovery engaged in an enterprise for mining the cement, which resulted in complete financial ruin. Now, when Rafael discovers the same deposits he naturally seeks to convert them into wealth, just as his father did, but here his mother interposes and to prevent a recurrence of the disaster she is forced to tell her son this incident in his father's life, which she had heretofore concealed. Instead of understanding her attitude as that of a well intentioned desire to prevent a repetition of his father's failure, Rafael interprets his mother's former secrecy as a sign of her lack of confidence in his abilities. As in the case of Oswald in Ibsen's *Gengangere*, suppressed inherited traits of character come to the surface. A misunderstanding of his mother's motives leads him to rebel against her authority and arouses within him the fatal suspicion that his father's wilfulness was due not so much to inherited tendencies as to his mother's attitude of distrust. By comparing his own case with his father's, he concludes that *his father was right in overruling his mother*. Thus Kirsten Ravn, by her mistaken policy of suppression, again brings about just the opposite result from that which she had desired. Her son's suspicions, fostered by her dictatorial methods, now grow into a conviction and an open break ensues.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Of all Bjørnson's stories *Absalon's Hår* best illustrates the failure of the 'modern' cultural ideal thru a lack of practical wisdom. An analogous situation arises in Ibsen's *Vildanden*, where the ideal of truth fails of realization because it is applied under unfavorable conditions. In either case practical wisdom would have saved the situation; whether the truth should be divulged or not depends upon circumstances. The tragedy of *Vildanden*, however, Bjørnson avoids by endowing Rafael's mother with an ideal devotion which finally triumphs over all her own mistakes and redeems her son's character.

The reason for a lack of confidence between mother and son is often due primarily to an habitual taciturnity, especially characteristic of the peasant. This taciturnity is often further enhanced by the fact that the relations of husband to wife render a free and open discussion upon any subject whatsoever impossible. The husband's mean spirit, his brutality and his tyrannical usurpation of human rights (as in the case of the John Kurt, Harald Kås or Nils Skrædder) force upon his wife a silence which becomes habitual and therefore almost impossible for her to break. Thus, thru her silence the mother neglects her prime duty of establishing a relation of confidence with her son. Her attitude of silence, furthermore, reacts upon the son who in turn finds it well-nigh impossible to open his heart to his mother and therefore he continues his own way with disastrous results.

Such is the case, for instance, with Arne whose first misstep might have been avoided if he had kept his mother in strict confidence. Only this first great catastrophe opens his heart to her and restores a normal relation of confidence between the two. Bjørnson's sympathy, however, is chiefly on the side of the mother, inasmuch as she cannot be held responsible for an attitude towards her son which has grown out of unavoidable circumstances. Social convention, which sanctions the supreme authority of the father and thus gives full rein to degenerate instincts, is the fundamental cause of this unhappy relation between mother and son. The following passage from *Arne* well illustrates the point in question.

"You won't ever tell me anything," and she began to weep again. "You never tell me anything either," said Arne gently. "But you are most to blame, Arne; I've got into such a habit of keeping silent, ever since I lived with your father, that you ought to have helped me along a little."

However much the ideal relations of mother to child may be disturbed or whatever the causes for this may be, Bjørnson never depicts an unnatural mother. No principle in life is so vital to her as the love for her child and, therefore, no theory as to human rights or duty towards self (as in the case of Ibsen's Nora) can separate her from her child, whose happiness is identical with her own. In order to promote her child's happiness and retain its love, she is willing to endure injustice

and even brutality at the hands of a degenerate husband. In other words, Bjørnson's mother stands the supreme test of humanity in order to realize the grand ideal of her life, viz., motherhood. For instance, at Nils Skrædder's death Arne's mother says: "Arne, you must remember it is for *your* sake that I have borne all this." Even Kirsten Ravn, with her refined instincts and sensitive pride, endured for the sake of her son Rafael the most outrageous insults that could be inflicted upon a decent woman. It is inconceivable how she could have endured such tyranny, had she not been willing to sacrifice even her self-respect in order to retain her influence over her son. With Ibsen's Nora, self-respect is the prime consideration, but with Kirsten Ravn it is her son's future welfare, not her own, which is at stake; all else is sacrificed to this end. This is the purely womanly type of mother, who possesses those traits of character peculiar to the Romantic ideal of womanhood, which Ibsen so often depicts (such as Inga in *Kongsemnerne*, Solveig in *Peer Gynt*, etc.).

Tomasine Rendalen, on the other hand, represents an approach to the more masculine ideal of womanhood, which enables the wife to cope with her husband on much more equal terms. Like Ibsen's Nora she rebels against an authority which is crushing out her life, but unlike Nora she does not solve the difficulty by avoiding the situation or by renouncing her duties as a mother, but takes up arms against her oppressor. The old order of things, which Nora leaves behind her, is destroyed by the supremacy of a new ideal of womanhood. Nora becomes morally emancipated but, a victim of the old social order, she lacks the efficiency and mental equipment to force a victory over her husband without at the same time forfeiting a mother's most precious heritage, viz., her children. The 'modern' ideal of womanhood, on the other hand, oversteps the narrow, conventional limits of woman's education and activities which resulted in Nora's inefficiency, and equips the woman to meet the situation which confronts her. Tomasine Rendalen takes up a course of physical and mental training which enables her to become both the physical and intellectual master of her degenerate husband. But Bjørnson's ideal of the 'modern' woman in Tomasine Rendalen is not marred by a caricature of masculine traits, such as Ibsen portrays, for

instance, in the character of Lona Hessel; there is no assumed air of democratic vulgarity nor a display of masculine prerogatives. Her strong hand guides her son's future destiny, and his ultimate victory over himself is directly due not only to his mother's new system of social education but also to the fact that she first triumphed over her degenerate husband. Thus, both mother and son are saved, while with Ibsen's *Nora* the children are left to their own fate in order to save the individual integrity of the mother's character.

Magnhild too represents this modern type of woman, but Magnhild has no children and since the full and free development of her own individuality is not restricted by the consideration for the future destiny of her offspring, Bjørnson here resorts to the traditional course of desertion as the only solution possible under the circumstances, thus avoiding the ethical dilemma into which Ibsen leads us.

It is, of course, natural that Bjørnson should have idealized the mother's character, in order to bring out into sharper relief the injustice of her position in family life. So far as the father is concerned, however, it can hardly be assumed that Bjørnson has exaggerated the state of things in actual life. Nils Skrædder, Harald Kås and the elder Kurt are, like Oswald's father in Ibsen's play, by no means rare examples of moral degeneracy due to the pernicious influence of strong drink and to the conventional double standard of morality. On the other hand, it is evident that in the delineation of the wife's character Bjørnson has infused a great deal of that Romantic idealism which pervades the whole atmosphere of his stories. In none of his tales, for instance, does the wife, thru contact with a coarse and brutal husband, herself become brutalized or forfeit even the least part of her natural sympathy or her fineness of feeling.

When Rafael, for instance, finally comes to a spiritual awakening, he realizes that he had gone astray because he had not followed the finer instincts of his nature; the Kurt blood had won the victory. Bjørnson depicts with great skill the gradual degeneration which took place in Rafael's character in direct contrast with that ideal moral refinement which his mother in her own case had always kept intact.

Mutual suffering at the hands of a cruel father exalts the mother's character and creates a bond of sympathy between

mother and son. "There are only two of us now, and we have suffered so much together," says Arne's mother. The mother also realizes that her son cannot be held responsible for inherited weaknesses; thus the boy's love for his mother is enhanced by her humane charity. Arne's mother, for instance, does not upbraid her son for getting drunk like his father, but is all the more tender to him on this account. And however despotic Rafael's mother is in the exertion of her authority, she is, nevertheless, exceedingly charitable and perhaps far too lenient with him as regards his moral waywardness, which she knows is largely due to an inherited weakness. There is much of Bjørnson's own love of humanity reflected in the character of these women.

The mother in Bjørnson's tales struggles for the possession of her child, not for the purpose of asserting her authority over her husband (as in the case of Ibsen's Fru Gunhild in *John Gabriel Borkman*) nor from motives of jealousy (as in the case of Allmers' wife in *Lille Eyolf*), but in order that her child may escape from a life of moral depravity and misery which otherwise must be its lot. Woman's sense of devotion is never thus divided (as with Ibsen) between husband and child, so long as the husband by his arrogance and depravity has not rightly forfeited her love (as in the case of Nils Skrædder or of Harald Kås). For instance, in *Mors Hænder* (1892) the mother preserves marital and parental devotion undivided, inasmuch as her husband, even tho morally weak, had never proved himself untrue to her or unworthy of her love. Indeed, it is chiefly weakness in human nature which appeals to woman's love both for her child and for her husband. Thus, the mother in *Mors Hænder* says: "We women do not love that which is noble (*højtbårent*) simply because it is noble. No, the object of our love must also be weak and must in someway stand in need of our help. We must see a mission. We women must love in order to believe."

Bjørnson here has struck the same chord of ideal devotion in woman's character as does Ibsen, who, however, does not always succeed, as Bjørnson does, in reconciling the mother's conduct with this primitive instinct. For instance, when Helmer (*Et Dukkehjem*, Act III) confronts his wife with the argument (which to the masculine mind is irrefutable) that "no one for

for love's sake sacrifices his *honor*." Nora replies: "Hundreds of thousands of *women* have done so"; yet she deliberately refuses to sacrifice 'self' for the sake of her children who are the mother's first and supreme object of love.

In Bjørnson's stories there are no such moral incongruities as are represented in Ibsen's dramas. An interesting example of this may be afforded by the following parallel from *Mors Hænder* and *Et Dukkehjem*.

When in *Mors Hænder* the daughter, who shares the aristocratic ideal that manual labor is degrading, feels disgraced because of her mother's coarse and unladylike hands, her mother replies: "If you have lived in a society where it is a shame for a lady to have such hands, then that is a *bad society*."

In Ibsen's *Dukkehjem* exactly the same conflict arises between the individual sense of righteousness and established convention, but convention as represented by the civil law and founded upon generally agreed principles of morality (which is not the case in *Mors Hænder* where convention represents a purely aristocratic code).

#### *Et Dukkehjem*

##### Act I.

*Krogstad*. The laws take no account of motives.

*Nora*. Then they must be very *bad laws*.

Thus Bjørnson again avoids the ethical dilemma into which Ibsen's dramatic instinct and his doctrine of non-compromise lead us.

#### e) *Character of the Mother*

Common sense is a virtue which nearly<sup>17</sup> all Bjørnson's mothers possess, even if they are temporarily led astray. A conspicuous example of this is Gunlaug in *Fiskerjænten*.

Altho Gunlaug did everything within her power to prevent the lure of a larger life from taking her daughter away from her, nevertheless, so soon as she found this to be impossible, she did not, like Dr. Stockman in Ibsen's *En Folkefende*, fight out the battle against overwhelming odds but secretly aided her daughter to escape from her. Her admirable coolness

<sup>17</sup> Kirsten Ravn and the mother in *Støv* may in some respects be an exception to this rule.

and equipoise in the face of the outrageous insults that an excited mob heaps<sup>18</sup> upon her wins the victory; a proof of her natural sagacity. This wisdom, so often displayed by Bjørnson's women characters, is in direct contrast to "the muddle-headed bungler" who in Ibsen's plays often carries "the banner of the ideal," such as Dr. Stockman or Gregers Werle.

The sanity of Bjørnson's characters and the sanity of the life in general which he depicts is one of the most refreshing elements that have ever entered into Norwegian literature. Practical wisdom is, in fact, the basic principle of Bjørnson's ethical propaganda; the measure of anything is the good that it works (cf. *På Guds Veje*, 1889). Neither the "ideal demand" (*det ideale Krav*) nor the principle of "all or nothing" can be realized in human life and therefore they find no place in Bjørnson's philosophy.

Furthermore, an ideal, if not attained, never in Bjørnson's tales results in a tragedy. His constructive spirit here again builds up a spiritual edifice in which the broken ideal may furnish a most important structural element. Women more often than men grasp the ethical value of disappointments. Rafael's father broke down when his financial enterprise failed; but Bjørnson's women characters by reason of their failures often rise to greater heights. This is beautifully illustrated in *En Dag*.

Carried away by that sentimental idealism which the aesthetic emotions often engender in women, the mother forsakes her husband and children for a worthless reprobate, whom she, however, believes to be the ideal man. Happily, however, she discovers her error in time and returns unscathed to the bosom of her family. Her disillusion, moreover, completely restores her true valuations of life and thus her error serves its proper ends instead of so embittering her life as to result finally in a tragedy. This story serves to illustrate the constructive spirit of Bjørnson's doctrine of evil. Man's nature is not essentially wicked, but a divine essence slowly working its way up from a primitive state towards perfection;<sup>19</sup> therefore, sin is only a

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Dr. Stockman's conduct under exactly the same conditions.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the expression of this doctrine in *Lyset* (1895):

Fra saa lavt til saadan tinde,  
hvad maa vi ei vid're vinne?

temporary evil which may be rectified by experience and training. The most potent factor in life to this end is the faculty of perceiving the real value of disappointments and of adjusting life to circumstances. Thus in *En Dag* the voice of conscience readjusts the mother's spirit to new conditions: "It said that her dreams bound together two summers, that which was and that which slowly had begun to awaken within her."

This new summer, the summer of future happiness based upon the experiences of the past, is the "Third Kingdom" for which Bjørnson strove. This "Third Kingdom" is not founded upon a blending of abstract philosophical truths, as in Ibsen's *Kejser og Galilæer*, but upon the simple principle of constructive compromise between good and evil, i.e., of making evil serve the good.

In Bjørnson's tales it is most often woman who has the clearest conception of moral valuations and is the most sensitive to ethical ideals. In *Brudeslåtten* (1872), for instance, it is Mildred's mother who first perceives the moral injustice which inherited clan prejudice has inflicted upon the Haugen family. Before the final reconciliation it had never occurred to either parent in the Tingvold family that "the Haugen family ought not to have suffered for their misfortunes, for they were entirely innocent." The attitude of Mildred's father towards his daughter's marriage to Hans Haugen is that of a wise submission to the inevitable. Her mother, on the other hand, experiences a moral redemption which borders upon religious ecstasy. The new spirit of reconciliation is for her an angel of deliverance from that moral slavery of family prejudice which had held her soul in bondage. The destruction of this false deal results in her atonement not only for the wrong she had done the Haugen family but also for that which she had done her own daughter, since by yielding to this family prejudice she had deprived her innocent daughter of the sacred privilege of living out her own life.

#### f) Conclusion

Bjørnson's tales reveal the great struggle for development which woman has undergone under those restrictions which the social order has laid upon her. In depicting family life, it was, therefore, natural that he should sympathize with the

wife and mother and endow her with those ideal qualities necessary to make the injustice of her position unequivocal. As the nation, so the family cannot be divided into independent moral factors, therefore it is not enough for woman simply to vindicate her rights as an individual (as Nora did), for she belongs not only to herself but also to her family and most of all to her children, who represent the future generation. In this interdependent relation of human individuals in the family man has long owed woman the debt of justice, equality and charity. The new ideal is based upon long accepted theories in the abstract and is, therefore, new only in its application. The simple, homely virtues of domestic life constitute the only basis upon which this new ideal can be realized. If these fundamental requirements are not met (as in the case of Ibsen's Nora), then the ideal of woman's individual development receives a shock which retards its general acceptance by conservative society, inasmuch as such a course inevitably runs counter to all fundamental notions of morality.

The charm of Bjørnson's writings lies in this fundamental simplicity of his thought and in the sanity of his vision. Ibsen and the whole Modern School of Realists have too often devoted their art to depicting the eccentric and abnormal. The trend of Realism has always been towards a mere negation of the older order of society and this emphasis upon the negative side of life has resulted in a perversion of the essential aim of the Realist. The modern School of Naturalists has thus contributed little towards the uplifting of humanity, inasmuch as the ideal is overshadowed by the desire to depict life as it is. Ibsen himself, by failing to adjust the ideal to a healthy environment, tended in the same direction and therefore his essential purpose is often misconstrued, especially by his followers in Germany. Bjørnson, on the other hand, sought to vindicate his ideal by adjusting it to man's *better nature*, and upon man's *better nature* alone can either art or the social order ever be redeemed.

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